

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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REP. TRENT VAN HAAFTEN'S STATEHOUSE REPORT

INDIANAPOLIS – The new Speaker of the Indiana House believes that we need to remove the “mystery” of the legislative process from Hoosiers. One of methods he has deployed is to broadcast our sessions over the Internet. If you want to watch the House in action, you can do so by accessing www.in.gov/legislative/session/video.html.

This past week exposed me to another mystery of our process, which is what it means to be in the minority party.

As many of you know, methamphetamine has had a great impact on our state. After having been the only legislator to serve on the statewide Meth Task Force, I introduced House Bill 1685, which contained the task force's recommendations to combat the production and use of this drug. I was pleased that the committee chair placed the bill on the calendar for a hearing.

My joy was short lived. Days before the hearing, I was informed by members of the majority that if I wanted the bill to move, I would need to remove my name from it as the author. After much thought, I decided not to agree to their request because I would lose control over the bill. When I told the committee chair of my decision, I was promptly informed that the bill would no longer be heard in committee. Instead, a meth bill introduced by a member of the majority party was placed on the calendar for a hearing.

Unfortunately, this new bill only covered one aspect of my proposal. In committee, an amendment containing 90 percent of my House Bill 1685 was placed in this new meth bill, House Bill 1223. In legislative terminology, a “strip and insert” had been performed, and I had learned another lesson about being in the minority.

My experience this past week is simply one of the “political mysteries” that takes place in the legislative process. I have signed on as a co-author of HB 1223 and will work diligently to have it passed. Although I was disappointed that politics kept a Democrat from being the primary author of this bill, the most important thing is that good legislation gets passed. Pride of authorship means nothing compared to providing solutions to our meth problem.

Aside from sharing the lessons of this week, let me also share some of the activity of the House:

We gave final approval to House Enrolled Act 1003, the bill I discussed a few weeks back that speeds up the implementation of the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC), the entity that will be charged with leading our state's efforts at job creation and retention.

I initially voted against this bill, but decided to support it after the Senate made changes to ensure that members of the IEDC's board must follow state ethics guidelines and comply with the Open Door Law and the Open Records Act. The administration's announcement that it will keep a regional economic development office in Evansville also alleviated my fear of our area being ignored in Indiana's efforts to bring good paying jobs to Hoosiers.

However, House Enrolled Act 1003 places the state's economic development efforts in the hands of a board controlled solely by the governor. These provisions continue a disturbing trend I have seen in a number of bills advocated by the current administration.

Should the governor be able to have sole control over so many things that impact the lives of local residents? It is a question that seems to apply to several other bills that are working through the legislative process.

House Bill 1002 would create the post of inspector general, a person selected by the governor who would have the power to file and prosecute criminal charges in any county in the state. I have concerns about the inspector general having greater authority than county prosecutors, who are selected by the voters in each county.

House Bill 1137 would create a "state information technology chief" appointed by the governor to oversee a variety of telecommunications services that have been handled in the past by a coalition that includes representatives from libraries, public schools and universities. HB 1137 gives one person the power to decide which schools have access to advanced services, how much they will pay for them, or whether the services will be offered at all.

House Bill 1719 attempts to place the state Bureau of Motor Vehicles under private control, which would allow license branches to be closed without any chance for public input. Years ago, license branches were operated under a political patronage system, with profits going to the political party of the governor.

These bills appear to be a series of attempts to place an increasing amount of authority in the hands of the executive branch and weaken the balance of power offered by the legislative and judicial branches of government. Since the separation of power is such an essential aspect of our democracy, I will continue to fight any measure that seeks to eliminate the separation. After all, our system is one that has always allowed the citizens of Indiana the opportunity to take an active role in determining the policies that benefit all Hoosiers.

We are entering the final two weeks for House bills to clear committees in our chamber. In the days to come, we expect to see a proposed biennial state budget come out of the House Ways and Means Committee.

The chairman of that group, State Rep. Jeff Espich (R-Uniondale), promised this week the budget would contain more funding for our schools. This is heartening news for those of us who have seen a number of distressing signs that schools are being forced into a financial crisis that could force teachers to be laid off, programs to be eliminated and class sizes to grow substantially.

House Democrats intend to see that Rep. Espich lives up to his promise on the budget. It will be interesting to see how he can balance those words against the governor's opposition to giving minimum guarantees in funding to schools, as well as his decision not to make up tuition support that had been promised to school corporations.

As always, I thank you for the opportunity to serve you.

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This Report can be accessed on the Internet at www.IN.gov/H76